

“Christianity: Boring, Untrue, and Irrelevant?”
Introduction to Series, “Is There More to Life Than This?”
Easter Sunday
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New City Church of Los Angeles
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Good morning. Happy Easter! He is risen. He is alive, and that’s why we are gathered here today. God is alive.

Welcome to New City Church!

My name is Kevin Haah. I am one of the pastors of New City Church of Los Angeles. I used to practice law for about 12 years before Grace and I heeded God’s call into ministry. We knew God was going to do something through us, but we didn’t know what it was; as we walked with God, though, it became clear that God wanted us to plant a church in downtown Los Angeles. And God gave us a dream about what kind of church he wanted us to plant.

Our dream is to be an inclusive, gospel-centered community of lovers of Jesus Christ who connect people to God, grow together, serve the city, and extend God’s kingdom.

- Our dream is to be an inclusive community where anyone can come, whether you are Black, White, Asian, or Latino, whether you are poor living in Skid Row or better off and living in a penthouse loft, whether you are an Obama supporter or a Clinton supporter or even a McCain supporter, whether you are gay or straight, whether you are living a morally upright lifestyle or a morally loose one. We want this to be an inclusive community where you can come as you are.

- Our dream is to be a gospel-centered community whose primary mission is to declare and live out the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are not a community that is ultimately about family values, ethics, or morals, but we are a community that is ultimately about how we have failed in our values, ethics, and life, and how God rescued us from the mess we’ve created. We are a community of people who are more sinful

than we thought we were and more loved by God than we ever imagined possible.
We are a community of sinners living in God's grace.

- Our dream is to be a loving and honest community where we can be intellectually and emotionally honest to each other, where we can take off our mask, and where we can love and be loved for who we are without judgment or condemnation.
- Our dream is to be lovers of Jesus Christ and seek Him for the pleasure of His company, and not for what He can do for us or what we think we can do for Him.
- Our dream is to connect residents in and around downtown LA and all of Los Angeles to God by connecting them to this church, where they can find transformation and hope through a relationship with God. We want to create a church where we can bring our friends. We want our church to be for people who don't go to church.
- Our dream is to grow with one another. We believe that the gospel transforms us, the Holy Spirit empowers us, spiritual practices place us where God can transform us, and transformation happens in the context of community.
- Our dream is to serve the city of Los Angeles, not just by sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ, but by living out the gospel of Jesus Christ. We will, in partnership with others, serve the needy; we will serve the lost; we will serve the forsaken; we will serve the hopeless. We will serve the city because God loves the city and we love the city.
- Our dream is to extend the Kingdom of God by becoming a movement of church planting in and around Los Angeles, around the state, and the world.

That is our dream. That is our vision. And today, we put that dream into motion. Today is the official beginning of this dream.

For those of you who are Christians and are here to celebrate this beginning with us, I thank you and ask that you pray for us.

For those of you who are not Christians and are here wondering what's going on, I want to welcome you because we've created a church especially with you in mind.

We have created an environment in which you can explore the person and teachings of Jesus Christ without being intellectually insulted, pressured, or judged. We have created an environment where you can belong even as you consider the person and teachings of Jesus.

[One of the saddest things happening in the Christian church is that we have become nothing like what Jesus was like. The church is supposed to be like Jesus, but we have become exactly the opposite: intolerant, judgmental, narrow-minded, offensive, sexist, homophobic, holier-than-thou hypocrites. And I am guilty of some of these behaviors too. But it is the vision of New City to reject this worldview because Jesus was not like this. I believe Jesus is saddened by how some of the churches have turned. I think we have to examine what Jesus taught and did before we accept or reject Christianity. That's what I hope to do.]

When I was growing up, I had three primary objections to Christianity, and I think a lot of people have these objections.

First, I thought it was boring.

- I used to go to church with my parents, and used to fall asleep all the time. They went to a Korean church and my Korean was declining, and every time I went to a worship service, I fell asleep. I didn't understand much of what was going on and I thought it was pretty boring.

- I felt like Robert Louis Stevenson (the author of Treasure Island) who once wrote in his diary, as if he was recording an extraordinary phenomenon: “I’ve been to church today, and am not depressed.”

Second, at one point in time, I thought Christianity was irrelevant.

- How could something that happened 2,000 years ago 5,000 miles away in the Middle East be relevant to me in 21st Century America?
- What relevance does the crucifixion of Jesus Christ have on my 21st Century life?
- How is Easter relevant to me?

Third, I also thought it was untrue.

- During my senior year in college, I concluded that Christianity was untrue.
- I took a series of classes called European Intellectual History. I studied all of the major Western philosophers and all the “isms.” I had a very compelling secular humanist professor. He started to reshape some of my worldviews.
- For a while, I compartmentalized my intellectual life from my spiritual life. I just assumed that Christianity couldn’t measure up to intellectual scrutiny. I put intellectual things in my intellectual compartment and spiritual things in my spiritual compartment. Until one day, they came crashing together and I realized that I couldn’t live like this anymore.
- So, I decided to follow my mind and walk away from God and the church. I dropped out altogether.

But as I look back, I gotta admit that I was a tad bit pretentious and prideful.

- I just assumed that there weren’t answers to these so called intellectual objections that I had. I never looked for an answer. I was too busy criticizing. I thought Christians were people who weren’t allowed to think, but were told to just believe. I didn’t know that a lot of smart people had thought about these questions for a

couple of thousand years and had come up with reasonable answers to these questions.

- Even though I went to church all my life, I was pretty ignorant about the reasons for Christian faith. I didn't really understand why Jesus had to die. Why couldn't he just forgive us? What is this about dying on the cross and all?

When I walked away from God, I remember feeling a sense of emptiness. I think many of us feel the same way, a sense of hunger or thirst, a feeling that there is something missing.

I think we all try our best to fill that emptiness with whatever we can.

- But, we find that when we get that one thing that we thought would plug the hole in our heart, it does not.
- For some, that emptiness is manifested by how we always look forward to the next thing in life. We can't be satisfied with the present, but always look to the next thing in life for satisfaction. That's the way I was.
 1. Maybe if I get into that school. And somehow, you get into that school. And it's great for about 3 weeks. But after that, you're still not satisfied.
 2. Maybe after I finish school. Then, you finish school, and it's great for about three weeks. But after that, you're still not satisfied.
 3. Maybe after I get a good job. Then you get a decent job, and it's great for about three weeks, but after that, you still feel that something is missing.
 4. Maybe if I find me a girlfriend. And you somehow manage to find yourself a girlfriend. And it's great for about three weeks, and . . .
- I think many of us go through life like that. Looking for the next thing, and when we get there, finding that it doesn't satisfy.

Jesus said: I am the bread of life.

- He is one person who can satisfy your hunger.

- I am a Korean-American. We eat a lot of rice. For my parents, if they don't eat rice, they don't feel like they ate.
 - I remember when I was in high school, my brother, who is five years older than me, got a job at a fancy computer company in Santa Barbara. When he came up for a business trip to San Jose, where we lived, he wanted to treat all of us to at the fanciest restaurant in San Francisco. I think it was called Maxwell's Plum. Being an immigrant family, none of us had ever been to such a fancy restaurant. We literally had a waiter dedicated to waiting right at the table for us. I don't remember what we ate, but it wasn't rice.
 - When we all came home, I remember the first thing my mom did was to eat rice and kimchee. Without eating rice, she just was not satisfied.
 - I think if Jesus came to my family, he might say: I am the rice of life.

Bernard Levin, one of the greatest newspaper columnists of our generation, who is not a Christian, once wrote:

Countries like ours are full of people who have all the material comforts they desire, together with such non-material blessings as a happy family, and yet lead lives of quiet, and at times noisy, desperation, understanding nothing but the fact that there is a hole inside of them and that however much food and drink they pour into it, however many motor cars and television sets they stuff it with, however many well balanced children and loyal friends they parade around the edges of it . . . it aches.

Jesus said: I am the bread of life. I am the one person who can satisfy that hunger.

Now, why is that? Why is Jesus the only person who can satisfy that hunger?

Jesus said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." I want to talk a little about what this means.

I. First of all, Jesus said, "I am the way": he brings direction for a lost world.

There was this nanny who was just learning to speak English. When there was a fight between the two kids, she ran upstairs and intended to say:

- “**What on earth are you doing?**” but she ended up saying “**What are you doing on earth?**”
- That is a good question.
 - What are we doing on earth?
 - Where do we come from?
 - Where are we going?
 - Who are we?
 - Does our life have any ultimate meaning?
 - What happens when we die?

These are big questions. These are the first order questions: Questions about the purpose and direction of our life.

Leo Tolstoy, a Russian novelist, author of *War and Peace*, wrote a book called “Confession” in 1879 in which he tells the story of his search for meaning and purpose in life. He rejected Christianity as a child.

- After college, he sought to get as much **pleasure** out of life as he could. He entered the social world of St. Petersburg and Moscow, drank heavily, slept around, gambled heavily, and led a wild life. But it did not satisfy him.
- Then he became ambitious for **money**. He inherited a large estate and made a lot of money from his books. Yet, this did not satisfy him.
- He sought **success, fame, and importance**. He also achieved these. He wrote what the Encyclopedia Britannica describes as “one of the two or three greatest novels in world literature.” Yet, he asked, “so what?” to which he had no answers.
- Then he became ambitious for his family. He married in 1862 and had a kind, loving wife and 13 children (which, he said, distracted him from any search for the overall meaning of life).

He had achieved all his ambitions and was surrounded by what everyone would say is complete happiness. Yet, one question drove him to the verge of suicide: **“What meaning is there in my life which the inevitability of death does not destroy?”**

- He searched for answers from **science and philosophy**. The best answer he got to the question of “why I live” was that **“in infinity of space and the infinity of time infinite small particles mutate with infinite complexity.”** He didn’t find this very satisfying.
- So, he decided to look around at his contemporaries. He saw that they were not facing up to the first order questions of life. They were just avoiding the issue. They weren’t thinking about them.
- Eventually he found that the **peasant** people of Russia had been able to answer these questions through their **Christian** faith, and he realized that only in Jesus do we find the answer.

A hundred years later, nothing has changed.

- Freddie Mercury, the lead singer of the rock group Queen, who died in 1991, wrote in one of his songs on the *Miracle* album “Does anybody know what we are living for?”
- Even though he was extremely wealthy and had thousands if not millions of fans, he admitted in an interview right before he died that he was desperately lonely. He said:

You can have everything in the world and still be the loneliest man, and that is the most bitter type of loneliness. Success has brought me world idolization and millions of pounds, but it’s prevented me from having the one thing we all need—a loving, ongoing relationship.

He is totally right to say that an “ongoing relationship” is the one thing that we all need.

- But, no human relationship will be able to do that. It will not completely satisfy us. There will continue to be something missing.

- Only one relationship can satisfy us, and that is a relationship with God. And **Jesus said: I am the way. He is the only one who can bring us to this relationship with God.**

Now what difference does a relationship with God make?

- When I was growing up, we had a TV that had a rabbit ear antenna. This is the era before cable television. Every channel was fuzzy and had double lines. We were pretty happy with the TV because it was all we knew. We had to learn how to adjust the little antenna to get the best picture possible. Sometimes, I would go adjust the antenna and the picture would look better when I was touching it, so my brother would tell me to stand right there without moving.
- Then, we moved to a house that had an antenna on the roof. Man, we could actually get a clear picture. Our enjoyment was completely transformed.
- Life without a relationship with God is like that.
 - Some people might seem quite happy, because they don't realize there is anything better.
 - Once we have experienced a relationship with God, the purpose and meaning of life become clear.
 - We see things that we have never seen, and we never want to go back to the old boring life. Life in God is not boring; it will be the most exciting thing in your life.

So, Jesus said: I am the Way.

II. Second, Jesus said, “I am The Truth”: Reality in a confused world.

Some people say: “it’s great for you, but it’s not for me.”

- This is not a logical position. If Christianity is true, it is of vital importance to every one of us. If it is not true, Christians are deluded and it’s not great for us—it is sad and the sooner we are corrected, the better it is.
 - C.S. Lewis, who wrote The Chronicles of Narnia, put it like this:

“Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.”

- **So, is it true?**
- What is the evidence for it?
- Jesus said “I am the truth.”
- Is there any evidence to back up his claim?

These are some of the questions we are going to talk about in this course.

When I was struggling, I didn’t know how much historical evidence there was about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

- The resurrection of Jesus is the linchpin of Christianity. I didn’t know so many people who were used to looking at historical evidence were convinced of this fact.

Professor Thomas Arnold, the former chair of history department at Oxford University, said the resurrection of Jesus is one of the most attested facts in ancient history.

- I didn’t realize how many of the pioneers of modern science were Christians:
 - Descartes, Newton, Kepler, Galileo, Locke, Copernicus, Mendel, Faraday, Boyle, Pasteur, Simpson.
 - Professor James Simpson, the brilliant scientist who invented painless surgery: when asked what his greatest discovery was, he said it was when he discovered Jesus Christ.
 - He looked at the evidence and he came to the conclusion that it was true.

Yet, when Jesus said, “I am the truth,” he meant more than intellectual truth.

- The Hebrew understanding of the word “truth” carries with it the notion of doing or experiencing the truth. Intellectual knowledge vs. experienced knowledge. Head versus heart. Christianity is more than just head knowledge.

- Let me illustrate. My wife and I have been married for about 14 years now. Let's say before I met my wife Grace that I read a book about her, called What's So Amazing About Grace?
 - Chapter 1: her gentle personality
 - Chapter 2: her amazing intelligence and wisdom
 - Chapter 3: her long suffering patience
 - Chapter 4: her potential to be a long suffering wife
 - Chapter 5: her athletic ability (a very short chapter).

After, I read the book, I thought, wow, what an amazing woman. I would love to meet her. That's intellectual knowledge. Now, we have known each other for about 19 years and been married for 14; I know she is an amazing person.

When a Christian says, "I know Jesus is the truth," he or she does not only mean that **Jesus is the truth intellectually but also** that he or she **has experienced Jesus as the truth.**

So, Jesus said: I am the Truth.

III. Third, Jesus said, "I am the Life": Life in a dark world.

Jesus said He is the life.

- He came to set us **free** from things that spoil our lives, the things that are wrong in our lives.
- There is a big difference between the things that we do that are wrong and the mistakes that we make. We all make lots of mistakes. And our mistakes can be harmless or even amusing. Here are actual mistakes made by people in college exams:
 - Moses went up on Mount Cyanide to get the Ten Commandments. He died before he ever reached Canada.
 - The Greeks were highly sculptured people and without them, we wouldn't have history. The Greeks also had myths—a myth is a female moth.

- Socrates was a famous Greek teacher who went around giving people advice. They killed him. Socrates died from an overdose of wedlock. After his death, his career suffered a dramatic decline.
- Johann Bach wrote a great many musical compositions and had a large number of children. In between, he practiced on an old spinster which he kept up in his attic. Bach died from 1750 to the present. Bach was the most famous composer in the world, and so was Handel. Handel was half-German and half-Italian, and half-English. He was very large.

So the mistakes that we make can be relatively harmless.

But the things that we do wrong really matter.

- There is such thing as “true” guilt.
- A great Russian novelist and Nobel Prize winner Aleksander Sol-zhen-it-syn said this: “
 - “The line separating good and evil passes, not through states, nor through classes, nor between political parties . . . but right through every human heart and through all human hearts.”

The Christian message is good news. That’s what the word “gospel” means. And the good news is this:

- God loves you.
- And he loves you and me so much that he came in the person of his son Jesus Christ, to live and to die for us.
- And on the cross Jesus took everything you and I have ever done wrong, said wrong and thought wrong.
- He died in our place, he died for you and he died for me.
- In fact, if you had been the only person in the world, he would have done it for you.
- He loves us that much.

And because of that it is possible for our guilt to be taken away.

- He came to set us free from **guilt**.
- He came to set us free from **addiction**, the things in our lives that we hate that get a grip of us.
- He came to set us free from **fear**—the fear of death and all the fears that go with it. Because Jesus not only died for us, he rose again from the dead. He conquered death.
- He set us free **to know God**, to have a relationship with God.
- He set us free **to change**, to be the kind of person that deep down we're longing to be.
- He **sends this Spirit** to live within us to begin to change us.
- The **fruit of the Spirit** begins to grow: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control.
- He set us free **to love** with a new dimension. Because when we've experienced God's love for us, being poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, that gives us a totally new love for everybody else—for God and for the world around us.
- So, it's not just about having some great feeling;
- It's about going out and making a difference in a world that so desperately needs transformation.

Now, it's not easy, necessarily. I don't think it's easy to be a Christian today. I think it's much harder to be a true Christian than not to be a Christian.

- Alice Cooper, the rock musician, has a dark secret, he said in an interview. He is a Christian.
 - And in an interview, he described his conversion to Christianity. But it hasn't been easy combining religion and rock.
 - This is what he says: "It's the most rebellious thing I've ever done. Drinking beer is easy. Trashing your hotel room is easy. But being a Christian, that's a tough call. That's real rebellion."

It is not easy. But nor is it boring. It's not untrue; it's not irrelevant to our lives. It's exciting, it's true, it's relevant. Because Jesus said "I am the way, the truth , and the life."

Now, I don't know how you respond to what we've been looking at this evening. I guess there are a lot of possibilities.

Some of you may say:

"Absolutely. I've never been in this place before, never heard of the Alpha course, but I know exactly what you're talking about. I have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ and it's the most wonderful thing." **That's fantastic!**

Others might say: "Well, I'm not sure that I have that relationship." When Paul went to Athens and spoke about the good news about Jesus and the resurrection, there were three different reactions.

1. **Some sneered.** And if you're here tonight sneering, please don't think that anyone is judging you. Many of us here went to talks about Christian faith before and we sneered then. So, it just may not be the right moment for you.
2. Other people when they heard him said: **"Hmm, not convinced, but I want to learn more. I'd like to investigate further."** And if you are in that category, I would really like to encourage you to investigate further. There are lots of ways in which you can do that.
 - a. You can do it on your own. Just get a New Testament Bible and read it for yourself.
 - b. You might say, I need some help. You can go along to any church and ask whether there is a course you can take that would help you.
 - c. Alpha is one course, which is a practical introduction to the Christian faith. I think it really is one of the best places to investigate. More than 2 million people in the U.S. have taken it. More than 10 million people in the world have taken it.

The point is that if it's true, it's of infinite importance. And it must be worth spending, say, ten Sunday mornings to investigate to find out whether you think it is true.

3. And finally, **some believed.**

- They only heard once, and they said “I’d love that.”
- And there may just be one person here tonight who says “I’d love that.” I would really love to have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.
- The good news is that you can experience that right now. It’s a very simple thing:
 - It’s turning away from the things that we know are wrong, saying “sorry.”
 - Thanking Jesus for dying for us, putting our faith in him.
 - And then saying “please”: please come and fill me with your Spirit.
 - Sorry. Thank you. And “please.”
- I want to make it possible for anyone there who would like to pray that prayer to do so. I am not going to ask anyone to pray out loud but in the silence of your hearts. God can hear the prayers in our hearts.

Prayer: Jesus is here, he is alive, and he can hear you this morning. Just echo this silently in your heart: Lord Jesus Christ, I am sorry. (If anything comes to mind...) I now turn away from everything that I know is wrong. Thank you for dying on the cross. I ask that you will come and fill me with your Spirit. Thank you Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.